

The tobacco barns that have come to be the primary symbol of Southern Maryland's agricultural heritage -- and that have descended into varying states of vine-covered, weather-beaten degradation -- now may be restored with the help of \$200,000 in federal grant money.

Residents of five Maryland counties -- Calvert, Charles, St. Mary's, Anne Arundel and Prince George's -- who own property where tobacco barns are standing can apply for up to \$10,000, with a matching requirement.

The funding came from Save America's Treasures, a program administered by the National Park Service to preserve historically significant sites or structures.

Several local and federal officials gathered Monday afternoon in front of the Samuel Spalding Tobacco Barn, built around 1840, along Vista Road in Hollywood to celebrate the grant.

"We want to preserve and protect, we want to teach, we want to appreciate our history. . . . Somebody may look at this and not understand it's a treasure," said Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.), who requested the grant funding.

The goal of barn preservation, he added, is "that my grandchildren and your grandchildren will understand what forged their culture, and their society, and their way of life: hard work, devotion to the land, building up a great country."

Though tobacco was the region's economic mainstay for nearly three centuries, it has faded in recent decades as the population has grown and other businesses and industries expanded. The vast majority of Southern Maryland farmers have stopped growing tobacco and accepted a state buyout program started in the late 1990s that provides payments to ease the transition to other crops.

Many of the estimated 3,000 to 4,000 barns have fallen into neglect. Others have been torn down to make way for development, and even been burned as training for firefighters. The drafty, open barns designed for air-curing the tobacco leaf once were everywhere in the Southern Maryland.

"A way of life is going away," said Peter Himmelheber, chairman of the St. Mary's County Historic Preservation Committee. "It's part of American history, and especially St. Mary's history, that we're kind of proud of."

In May 2004, the barns were placed on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's list of the 11 most endangered places.

The Save America's Treasures grant will be administered in the state by the nonprofit Preservation Maryland organization. Such grants have nearly always been directed at specific historic places and not for a category of buildings, said Joshua D. Phillips, director of preservation services at Preservation Maryland. He said a grant to preserve prairie churches in North Dakota is the only similar grant from Save America's Treasures.

"We're breaking new ground here," he said.

The grant is intended as seed money for a larger barn preservation effort, Phillips said, and an additional \$30,000 contribution from the Maryland Historical Trust was announced Monday as well. The funding must be used for work that preserves the historic character of the barn, including roof repairs and foundation work. The deadline to apply for the grant funding is March 15, and the decisions will be made a month later, Phillips said.

Historians said the oldest tobacco barn in Southern Maryland is in St. Mary's City, built around 1785.

The Spalding barn, where officials gathered Monday, is an example of the "bonnet" style, with the roof forming a bonnet shape because of the sheds affixed to the sides, said Teresa Wilson, historic preservation planner for St. Mary's County. Inside the structure today, graffiti mars the old boards and beer cans litter the ground. It has not been used for tobacco since about the 1980s, Wilson said.

The barn, built with pegged mortise and tenon joints, was on the property when Spalding bought it in 1921, according to a short history of the barn. Over the years, the Spalding farm typically grew 10 to 15 acres of tobacco each year, Wilson said. Inside, the farmers would hang the sticks of tobacco from the beams until cured and then strip the leaves.

Sam Spalding Sr., 75, said he enrolled in the state buyout in 2000 and stopped growing tobacco. Now corn, soybeans and hay grow on the family farm, which is divided among relatives. His daughter Kathy Dean said she remembers the dilapidated barn being used as a hiding place for people fleeing the police.

"Growing up, we used to say it was an eyesore," she said. "I guess we're not going to be saying that anymore."